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ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that alcohol consumption is strongly affected by situational factors, especially social factors. To explore the relevance to drinking of the need for social approval in social situations, 36 male college students were asked to predict how much they would drink in several situations varying in how certain they were of their social standing in a group and whether or not drinking was a behavior approved of by that group (uncertain-drinking valued, uncertain-drinking not valued, and certain-drinking valued). Subjects were divided into high and low need for approval groups based on a median split of their scores on the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. Results showed the nature of the situation and the subject's need for approval were both significantly related to predicted drinking behavior, with a certain social situation and a low need for approval leading to the most drinking. Contrary to expectations, there was no interaction between situational factors and the need for social approval. (Author/JAC)

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PREDICTED SOCIAL DRINKING AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL APPROVAL

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Summary

Male college students who were identified as being high or low in the Need for Approval predicted how much they would drink in several social situations. A secure social situation and a low Need for Social Approval consistently led to predictions of the heaviest drinking behavior.

Abstract

This experiment was designed to explore the relevance of the Need for Social Approval to drinking in social situations. Male subjects were asked to predict how much they would drink in several situations varying in how certain the subjects were of their social status in a group and whether or not drinking was a behavior approved of by that group. The nature of the situation and the subjects' need for approval were both significantly related to predicted drinking behavior, with a certain social situation and a low need for approval leading to the most drinking. Contrary to expectations, there was no interaction between situational factors and the need for social approval.

Research on American subjects has indicated that alcohol consumption is strongly affected by situational factors, especially social factors. The usual finding has been that subjects tend to match the drinking rate of their partner or an experimental confederate, regardless of whether the partner models a high or low rate of alcohol consumption(1, 2, 3, 4, 5). Social factors are not the only variables in the situation that have been shown to influence drinking behavior. Russell and Mehrabian(6) have suggested that alcohol use is to a great extent motivated by its emotion-altering effects, and a study by Mehrabian(7) confirmed that patterns of alcohol consumption are indeed related to the emotional states of subjects. Other investigators have found that alcohol consumption can be affected by the stress and arousal involved in performing intellectual problem solving tasks(8), and that in these situations subjects may use alcohol as a means of "handicapping" themselves so that potential failure can be attributed to face-saving external causes rather than internal causes(9).

The search for personality traits related to social drinking has proven less fruitful. A few studies have indicated a relationship between characteristics such as social anxiety(10) and sensation seeking(11) and alcohol use, but there has thus far been less evidence that drinking is controlled by internal individual differences than evidence that drinking is strongly controlled by external situational factors.

The aim of the current study was to investigate further the question of the relative contributions of situational and personality factors to social drinking. More specifically, it was thought that a personality dimension sensitive to variations in the social and emotional components of the situation might prove to be a useful predictor of drinking behaviors. A dimension that seemed most relevant in this context was the Need for Social Approval(12). Persons high in the Need for Social Approval have

been shown to be more conforming to the expectations and behaviors of others(13, 14, 15, 16), and those high in the Need for Approval experience higher levels of emotional arousal during the initial stages of interpersonal encounters(17). Thus, the Need for Approval has been shown to be related to the social, emotional, and self-presentation factors already known to affect drinking behavior.

It was predicted that overall there would be a significant main effect for the situation on how much subjects would predict that they would drink, with situations where subjects felt secure and where drinking was clearly a group-valued activity consistently eliciting the most drinking, and situations where subjects felt insecure and where drinking was clearly not a valued activity producing the least. It was also hypothesized that persons high in the Need for Approval would be more susceptible to group influence in situations where they were uncertain of their status in the group than in situations where they knew the other persons in the group well and were more certain of their standing with them. Therefore, it was expected that differences in the Need for Approval would be most effective in predicting drinking in situations where subjects were uncertain of their status with the other people present. Specifically, an interaction between the need for approval and characteristics of the situation was predicted in that subjects high in the need for approval would drink more than subjects low in this need in uncertain social situations where drinking was clearly a group-valued activity; they would drink less than low need for approval subjects in uncertain situations where drinking was clearly not valued by the group. There should be no significant differences between high and low need for approval subjects in social situations where their standing in the group is more certain.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 36 male college students recruited from undergraduate psychology classes. The mean age of the subjects was 20.33 years. Subjects were not asked to give their names, and were assured that all information would be kept strictly confidential.

Design

The design was a 2 X 3 mixed factorial design with the Need for Social Approval(high vs. low) and the nature of the drinking situation (uncertain-drinking valued, uncertain-drinking not valued, & certain-drinking valued) as the independent variables.

Materials

Two questionnaires were used: The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale(with a number of irrelevant filler questions) and a six item drinking behavior questionnaire.

Procedure

Subjects filled out the questionnaires in a large classroom in the presence of a female experimenter. There were two different sessions of approximately equal size. All subjects were informed that they were participating in a psychological study on personality and personal attitudes toward drinking. After being instructed to answer all questions as honestly and as accurately as possible, the subjects filled out the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale, and then proceeded to the second questionnaire. On this questionnaire, they were asked to read through six hypothetical drinking situations and to predict their behavior in each situation as accurately as they could. There were three kinds of drinking situations, each represented by two different stories. The written instructions at

the top of the questionnaire read as follows:

> Imagine yourself in each social situation given below. Read each situation carefully and then predict your drinking behavior as honestly and accurately as possible. Use only the choices given below to predict your behavior. Circle the best prediction for each situation.
>
> -don't drink at all(nothing alcoholic all evening)
>
> -drink just a little bit(one or two drinks at most all evening)
>
> -drink moderately(several drinks throughout the evening, perhaps to the point of feeling slightly high)
>
> -drink a lot(to the point where you are clearly feeling drunk)
>
> -drink even more(to the point where you speech is slurred and you are visibly quite drunk)
>
> -drink excessive quantities(perhaps to the point of being sick or passing out)

Each social situation was followed by the question "How do you predict you will behave?" followed by the six aforementioned alternatives.

As previously noted, there were three different social situations, each represented by two different stories. These situations were 1) A situation where the subject was uncertain of his standing within a group where drinking was clearly a valued activity(uncertain-drinking valued), 2) A situation where the subject was uncertain of his standing within a group where drinking was clearly not a valued activity(uncertain-drinking not valued), and 3) A situation where the subject was certain that he was liked and accepted by the group, and certain that drinking was a group valued behavior(certain-drinking valued). An example of each of these situations is as follows:

Uncertain-drinking valued -

You are invited to a small sorority party by a girl you don't know very well, but would like to know better. Upon arriving at the party, you find that you don't know anyone there except your date. Looking around, you notice that everyone seems to be having a good time. There is much dancing, laughing, and drinking going on. Some of the guests are already quite drunk. Your date leads you to the bar and tells you to help yourself; all drinks are free. She leaves you standing alone next to the bar, saying that she will be back shortly as she goes to talk to a friend. Soon, your date and her friend return, stating that they have decided to really have a great time tonight by trying to see who can get drunk first. You are urged to participate also. How do you predict you will behave?

Uncertain-drinking not valued -

You go home for the weekend. You are invited to your girlfriend's great aunt and uncle's house for Sunday dinner. This will be the first time you have met your girlfriend's relatives, who, she says, are elderly and are strict Baptists. The uncle, being cordial, offers you a drink before dinner, saying that neither he nor his wife drinks, but that you may if you so desire. How do you predict you will behave?

Certain-drinking valued -

You go to a stag movie with your two closest friends. There are many other people there that you know from school. Three kegs of beer sit in the middle of the room waiting to be tapped. You are told to tap the first keg and chug a beer, which you do. Throughout the evening, you, your friends, and acquaintances laugh, joke around, and watch porno movies. All the guys are getting pretty loaded.

How do you predict you will behave?

Upon completing the questionnaires, all subjects were thanked, debriefed, and dismissed.

RESULTS

Subjects were divided into high and low need for approval groups based on a median split of the scores from the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The subjects' responses to each of the hypothetical drinking situations were scored on a six point scale with a score of "one" corresponding to no drinking at all and a score of "6" corresponding to drinking excessive quantities of alcohol. The scores for the two situations in each category were summed to provide a single score for each subject in each of the three categories of drinking situations.

The 2 X 3 ANOVA revealed that there were significant main effects for the Need for Approval, $F(1, 34) = 6.23$, $p. < .05$, and the nature of the situation, $F(2, 68) = 110.02$, $p. < .001$. Subjects high in the need for approval predicted that they would drink less than did subjects low in the need for approval, regardless of the situation. (Means: 4.60 vs. 5.72) Also, subjects consistently reported that they would drink the most in the certain-drinking valued situations and least in the uncertain-drinking not valued situations. (Means: 6.87 vs. 5.62 vs. 3.00) The two way interaction was not significant, $F(2, 68) = 1.58$.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that drinking would be strongly controlled by the nature of the situation was strongly supported, as these students were more likely to predict heavy drinking in situations where drinking was a group-valued activity and they felt secure in the group. Subjects predicted very little drinking in uncertain situations where drinking was clearly not highly valued.

It was also hypothesized that there would be an interaction between the two independent variables so that subjects that were high in the need for approval would drink more than low need for approval subjects in uncertain social situations where drinking was valued and less than low need for approval subjects in uncertain situations where drinking was not valued. This hypothesis was not supported. However, this is not to say that need for approval was unrelated to predicted drinking behavior. On the contrary, the significant main effects for each of the independent variables clearly demonstrated that both the need for approval and the nature of the situation were strongly related to predictions of future drinking behavior. It is questionable, however, that the relationship works as had been hypothesized.

In hindsight, it may be that the investigators overestimated the extent to which heavy drinking could ever be considered socially desirable, and thus were wrong in predicting that subjects high in the need for approval would ever predict extreme drinking in any social situation. On the other hand, it may be assumed that subjects were not as involved in the situations as if they had actually been experiencing them, and perhaps the predicted interaction might be found if actual drinking behavior(rather than hypothetical predictions) was measured. It is also reasonable to assume that admitting to heavy drinking on a questionnaire may in fact be less socially desirable than actually conforming to the behaviors of the people around oneself in an uncertain social situation. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the need for social approval is a personality dimension related to a person's drinking behavior in social situations.

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FOOTNOTE

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